

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL FILMMAKING AND HOW IT AFFECTS EDUCATION IN FILMSCHOOLS

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Abstract

The present paper discusses the impacts and changes brought about by digital technologies and the transformations they entail for the different areas of film production, development and education. By focusing on the particular case of one school – The Cologne Film School (ifs) – and how this school has embraced digital disruption, the paper scrutinizes all areas that are impacted by the digital and how film schools can and should react.

The patterns of production, reproduction, and distribution of cultural content supposedly never changed in such a fundamental way and within such a short time frame, as they did within the last 20 years. The cultural relevance of digitalization is vast: In terms of content, because technical (re)producibility is facilitated, and in terms of technology, because digital media with its specific characteristics is expandable. In principal, for a digitally produced work or piece of art there is no ending, they could be changed or continued forever.

Our media culture has never been as diverse as it is now – it seems hard to predict in which direction its evolution will lead us. New media also means that there will be new job descriptions, new methods of media education and that new competences will be in demand. Digital workflows increasingly determine professional everyday lives, and job profiles in the media industry are more and more differentiated, while more and more specialization seems to be in demand.

Film: Even the word seems outdated. Rapidly developing advances in digital technology have made filmmaking more portable and more affordable. Anyone around the globe, who hasn't had access to resources and funding for filmmaking before, now has the opportunity to create movies and distribute them. Films have become ubiquitous. The

sheer amount of content posted on the internet leads to an interesting question: How can filmmakers today stand out as artists with so many projects being produced?

This has left many film school professors and industry insiders wondering what film schools should offer their students in times like these.

At the ifs internationale filmschule köln – like anywhere else – we have discussed this topic frequently, and continue to do so on a regular basis. We try to find answers to the challenges provoked by the digital revolution and its effects on filmmaking, which might be considered to be going in opposite directions, but in fact they are complementary. We could even say: The digital evolution left a deep imprint on the development, strategies and growth of our school, perhaps more than others, since we are one of the youngest film schools in Germany. The ifs internationale filmschule köln was founded in the year 2000, firmly built on two preceding schools: the "Filmschule NRW" (Film School North Rhine-Westphalia) in 1997, and the "Schreibschule NRW" (Writers' School North Rhine-Westphalia) in 1995.

From the beginning, "digital disruption" was part of our curricula, at first in critical studies. Our professor for comparative media studies, Dr. Gundolf Freyermuth, was principally appointed,

because he was at that time one of the few media scientists who focused on the digitalization of film and media in his tuition and research. Prof. Freyermuth is a brilliant scholar, and his objective was clearly to implement and establish a high level of digital literacy among the students, and a familiarity with the main theories and doctrines on digital culture and their defenders – implying, of course, the transfer of this knowledge to the students' own artistic and practical work.

At the same time we thought it necessary to stress the importance of craft in audiovisual storytelling in a more traditional sense.

In spite of the change in the media, the fundamentals of storytelling remain important. Profound and repetitive instruction in dramaturgy and the core elements of storytelling will continue to lead the students to be better writers. However, writers need to expand their knowledge of the digital realm – regarding story architectures and spatial storytelling – for instance in the context of 3D. They also need to learn about spatial semantics in general: In narrative spaces heterotopias come to life: dream worlds, surrealism, games of thought, fantasies. "Story-architects" of the future need dramaturgical models, which function in 3D, and they need to be trained in theory and practice.

One of the main effects of digital filmmaking is of course the multiplication of possibilities to create images and sound. According to renowned media scholar Lev Manovich, digital cinema represents, an “elastic reality”. With the options to manipulate single digital images or scenes, the medium film is transformed to a series of “paintings, paintings in time”.

Since the transformation of digital material usually happens during the post production phase, digital filmmaking leads to an emphasis on postproduction. More jobs exist now in postproduction than anywhere else in the audio visual industry. In our “Editing Picture & Sound” study course, students learn how to drive storytelling through manipulating images and sound. Being trained for both editing fields; image and sound equivalently, they are enabled to later focus on one. But the core is still the same: The editor has to find the right dramaturgy for each film and defining a workflow using various digital tools, is simply contributory to his or her process. This has become a special challenge in digital times, where restrictions of quantity in the raw material no longer exist and endless possibilities confront a generation which struggles with decision making.

In 2012 – after diverse hearings with experts from the industry – we introduced our new BA-study program “Visual Arts”,

which we later named “VFX & Animation”. Our VFX & Animation students are trained to work with the most relevant visual effects programs, enabling them to expand their possibilities of artistic expression and design. In addition, they learn how to connect rendered images with scenes shot in a photo-realistic way. Via 3D- animation the students design and realize entire short films as well as the settings for virtual reality environments. The interdisciplinary structure of the school allows us to teach communication between the departments VFX & animation and cinematography, supporting learning from peers, which leads to better results.

In 2015 we merged our three BA study courses into one course: BA Film. The effects and needs of digital workflows had a strong impact on this move. We realized that in times of digital filmmaking the need for an interdisciplinary understanding and more intense collaboration was increasing. The merger aimed to diminish the lack of knowledge of the interfaces between the traditional departments and disciplines in film production. This strategy was also designed to inspire and implement non-linear thinking and operating, within the production process.

In the spring of this year (2017), we added the seventh discipline to our BA Film study course: production design – a department, which had already been part

of the school for many years in our further education branch. As a field of study it combines the classical analogue work in the art department with the multiple techniques of virtual cinema. Students collaborate closely with their fellow students from the VFX-department and of course, all the other film students.

The effects of digital filmmaking also lead to new fields within traditional film-education, such as transmedia and entrepreneurship, where the students need to be prepared for evolving digital markets. Since audiovisual communication has become the main medium on all potential platforms, there are by far more markets to explore than the classical realm of entertainment for cinema and TV, promotional films and advertisement, such as: games, architecture, natural sciences, history, archeology, sports and other parts of the economy, i.e. the car industry. Distribution has changed and expanded: There is so much material being produced, calling for strategies to make artistic results visible in a huge fragmented market.

Another effect of film becoming digital, apart from the digitalization of the production process as a whole and the need to provide digital equipment for every step in the workflow, was the re-organization of project work within the film production in our school. Since 2016, our project development and producing, follows the design thinking

process. Meaning: the process leaves the linear structure and becomes more open and non-linear, following principles of iteration, agile producing and prototyping.

Finally, we realized that there is a deficit of artistic and scientific research in the realm of digital media. Basically, all of us feel the need for constant learning via innovation. This is the main reason, why we decided to implement a new research-oriented MA program called Digital Narratives. Our MA Digital Narratives is a 2-year international program, where innovative narrative forms in digital media are explored artistically and theoretically. The program focusses on the creation of trans-platform-experiences rather than one-off-narratives, and on how audiences can be “designed” for digital innovation. At the same time, the effects of digitality and data on individuals and society are investigated critically. We launched the program in 2016 and received a large international response to the first call. Today students from all over the world are studying in this program.

Last not least – digitality produces data that potentially can go global. When we became a consortium partner in the first edition of ESSEMBLE in 2011, this EU-funded program clearly was an international mirror of inspiration for the implementation of digital filmmaking in our curricula at that time and a key factor in

our internationalization. Continuing on, we have expanded our international relations considerably and increased the number of international programs we participate in. But also within the more traditional programs – our goal must be to prepare our students for the future of audiovisual media in a globalized world.